

## Narrative of Alexis Clermont

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### **NARRATIVE OF ALEXIS CLERMONT. IN AN INTERVIEW WITH THE EDITOR.<sup>1</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> At the narrator's home in De Pere, June 23, 1888, in the presence and with the assistance of the late Andrew J. Vieau. The language is necessarily that of the Editor, for Clermont was illiterate, and the information could only be elicited by careful cross-questioning. Vieau's own intimate knowledge of the principal facts of Clermont's life was of material value in assisting the exercise of his friend's memory. The manner of Clermont's narration is preserved as closely as is practicable under the circumstances. In October, 1892, Clermont, then in his 85th year, desirous of revisiting Chicago, walked the entire distance of 240 miles over his old mail-route, in the identical costume, mail pouch and all, which he wore when a carrier in the "30's." His path led through Kaukauna, Appleton, Menasha, Neenah, Oshkosh, Fond du Lee, West Bend, Milwaukee, Racine, Kenosha, Waukegan, and Evanston. Being poor, and unsophisticated, he had hoped that his overland journey would attract sufficient popular attention to win for him a revenue sufficient to support his declining days; but it failed of this purpose, and friends were obliged to send him home. Clermont died at De Pere, February 8, 1899.— Ed.

I was born on Mackinac Island, April 3, 1808. My father—I do not know his baptismal name—was killed in the War of 1812—15; he was a French Canadian, and at the time was serving in the British army. My mother married again, this time to François Beaudien, and in the autumn of 1820 they came with me to Green Bay.

In the fall of 1828, Joseph Paquette,<sup>2</sup> who had a place below Dutchman's Creek, took a contract for furnishing hay to Fort Winnebago, at the Fox-Wisconsin portage. I went to the portage with Paquette and his other men, to make the hay, my wages being, if I remember aright,

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2 A cousin of Pierre Paquette, of Portage. See *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xii, pp. 402, 403.— Ed.

453 seventy-five cents a day, and board. We returned home in a boat, down the Fox River.

After this I became one of the crew of a Durham boat—my first employer being Daniel Whitney; the next, Findlay Fisher Hamilton.<sup>1</sup> There were generally seven men of us—six poles and a steersman; sometimes there was a cook, but the usual custom was to have a cook for a fleet of three boats. Traders were in the habit of running such a fleet; for when we came to rapids, the three crews together made up a crew big enough to take the boats and their lading through with ease. Each boat had a captain who was steersman. Durham boats were from sixty to seventy feet long, and carried from twelve to sixteen tons.

1 A Green Bay trader, married to Catherine Boyd.— Ed.

The round trip, from Green Bay to Portage and return, would take from sixteen to twenty days; if Lake Winnebago was rough, it might last a month. During storms on the lake, we always tried to run to Garlic Island, where there was a good harbor, also good water; but frequently we were obliged to camp on the mainland.

Wages were, sometimes, for the trip; usually, however, they were \$1.25 a day and board—although, in the fall, because of the cold water through which we had to work at the rapids, we got from \$1.50 to \$1.75. The captain got from \$2 to \$2.25— after a few seasons, I became a captain. Upon reaching a rapid, going down, four of the crew would jump out, two on a side, and bear up the boat, while two men remained at the bow to pole, and the steersman kept his place at the steering oar. When the weather was cold,—for we ran during the entire season of navigation,—one man would run ahead on the bank, and light a fire to warm us, for we were completely drenched, and in a shivering condition.

During the Black Hawk War (1832), I served on the home-defense company of volunteers, under Colonel Tyler, to protect Fort Howard. That disturbance over, I ran the mail on foot, from Green Bay to Chicago, the contractor 454 being Pierre B. Grignon. I would start

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out from the postoffice in Shantytown, taking the Indian trail to Manitowoc. Only twice would I see the lake between Green Bay and Milwaukee—at Sauk River, twenty-five miles north of Milwaukee, and at Two Rivers. From Milwaukee I went to Skunk Grove, then to Gros Point, where I struck the lake again, and then I would see no more of the lake until I reached Chicago.

At Milwaukee there were Jacques Vieau, Sr.,<sup>1</sup> and Solomon Juneau. I do not remember any one else there. At Gros Point, Michael Ouelmit had a little trading post. As for Indians, there were large villages of them at Manitowoc and Sheboygan, not many at Milwaukee, and I do not recollect that there were any villages between Milwaukee and Chicago. If I remember aright, there were at this time but ten houses in Chicago. John, James, and Robert Kinzie, I remember well; also the postmaster, John Logan.

<sup>1</sup> See *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xi, pp. 218–225.— Ed.

In making my trips I was not alone. An Oneida Indian always accompanied me. The load was limited to sixty pounds, and we usually had that weight. As a rule it took us a full month to make the round, from Green Bay to Chicago and return. We carried two shot-bags filled with parched corn; one of them hulled (*bré-grolé*), the other ground ( *plurien* ). For the greater part of our diet, we relied upon the Indians, or on what game we could kill; the bags of corn were merely to fall back upon, in case the Indians had moved away, as they were apt to, on hunting and fishing expeditions. At night, we camped out in the woods, wherever darkness overtook us, and slept in the blankets which we carried on our backs. In Chicago we merely stopped over night, and promptly returned the way we came; unless we were delayed by a tardy mail from Detroit, which reached Chicago by steamer in summer, and by foot, overland, in winter. One time I remember making a special trip with a letter from Gen. George M. Brooke, then in charge at Fort Howard. The mail carrier was three days 455 ahead of me, but I overtook him just as he left Gros Point for the south. Our pay was usually from \$60 to \$65 for a round trip such as I have described,

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although in the fall it sometimes reached \$70. I made my last overland trip to Chicago in the summer of 1836.

Then I was placed on the route to Portage, going sometimes on horseback and sometimes on foot. At first this was on a contract held by a Galena man, who came up to Green Bay to get some one to serve this end of the route; later a Green Bay man got the job. I served on this route, as the only carrier, for several years, off and on. It took a week to make the round trip. From Green Bay to Oshkosh, I would sometimes go on the east side of Fox River, and sometimes on the west. From Oshkosh I went along an Indian trail to Green Lake, thence to Portage. On the south side of Lake Puckaway was an Indian village, where now is the white village of Marquette; a man named Gleason had a trading post there. It was not on my trail.

I remember that in March, 1839, I started out on my return from Portage, my way leading through Bellefontaine, twelve miles northeast of Portage. The ground was covered with snow, and I soon became snow-blind. Francis le Roy kept a tavern and trading house at Portage, and because of my condition hired one of his sons to carry the mail for me as far as Bellefontaine.<sup>1</sup> There, while I was waiting to recover, Col. William Chapman, of Fort Crawford, came along on horseback, on his way to Fort Howard. By his invitation, I joined him, and kept up with him—he riding, and I on foot—as far as Riviere du Roche, where we had for breakfast a potato apiece. But Chapman now went ahead, and I was left to trudge along alone, with the mail bag on my back.

<sup>1</sup> A farm conducted by Pierre Paquette. See *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xii, pp. 402, 403.— Ed.

I had had hard work crossing the Fond du Lac River, but came at last to the house of J. Bannister, which was, I believe, the first house built in Fond du Lac. I was very hungry, but could make no one hear my poundings at the 456 door. So I pushed on to the Indian village of Calumet, where I arrived at ten or eleven at night, only to find that everybody had gone out into the sugar bush. Wandering on a way, I was just starting a fire to warm

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myself, for I was stiff with cold and very hungry, when I saw another small blaze off through the woods, and hurried to it. There I found a party of Stockbridge Indians, with two teams of horses. They had been hauling hand-made shingles from Stockbridge village to Fond du Lac, for Daniel Whitney. The bad road had belated them, and they had camped for the night. Sitting on my mail bag, in front of the fire, I hoped that my hosts would get something for me to eat; but they did not, and the warmth of the blaze making me drowsy I dropped off to sleep. At daybreak the cold awakened me; so I straightened my stiff legs, and getting up, stirred the fire. Finally one of the Indians bestirred himself, and going around among the sleepers, awakened them one by one. Then I learned that they had practically nothing to eat; for hoping to get through to Fond du Lac, they had brought nothing with them. However, I noticed a frozen potato on a stump, and warmed and ate it.

Starting out afresh to Stockbridge village, on the way I came across a house where a woman lived alone. I asked for breakfast, at the same time telling her that I was penniless, but being the mail carrier would pay her upon my return. "We don't trust!" was her reply; so on I walked along the trail, until I came to a Stockbridge Indian chopping in the sugar bush. He pointed to a house near by, where another woman lived alone. This time, in asking for breakfast, I did not tell of my lack of money until after the meal was eaten, and the woman had given me a pair of stockings and mended one of my moccasins. When I admitted my condition, her eyes blazed and she hit me over the head with a broomstick. My legs were stiff, and my bag seemed unusually heavy, yet I made off with rapidity. In August, in Green Bay, I was in a bowling alley, and saw this woman, with other Stockbridges of both sexes. She 457 demanded of me and I paid fifty cents, half of which was probably for the breakfast, and the rest for the broomstick.

After my mail-carrying experience—once I made a trip as foot carrier, to L'Anse, Michigan. I was guide and chainman for Capt. Thomas J. Cram, who ran the boundary between Wisconsin and Michigan.<sup>1</sup> We went up the Menomonee, and portaged over to Lake Vieau Desert, and then had a three days' portage from that lake over to the Ontonagon.<sup>2</sup>

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1 In 1840. See *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xi, pp. 475–478.— Ed.

2 Andrew J. Vieau here remarked to the Editor that Ontonagon is a Chippewa word, meaning “place of the wooden bowl”— *onto*, place; *nagon*, wooden bowl.— Ed.

Then I returned to my river work. But pretty soon the steamboats came,<sup>3</sup> and then there was no longer any use for Durham boats. I was engaged as pilot on the steamer “Black Hawk,” Captain P. Hotaling. We ran from De Pere to Kaukauna, whence there was a stage to Menasha, and another from Menasha to Oshkosh. After that I was pilot on the “Aquila,” the “Appleton,” and the “Pearl;” sometimes I served as captain—as captain or pilot, I served at one time or another on most of the early steamboats on the Fox. When the railroads came, steamboating ceased to be an important business on this river. In time I dropped out of the work, and have since lived a very quiet life, here at De Pere.

3 This was in 1841, when (February 17) the Fox and Wisconsin Steam Boat (Co. was organized. See *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, xiii, p. 309.— Ed.